

# *Penn-Northwest* **DIGEST**

*Moving Mercer County, PA forward*

Vol. 1 No. 2

Summer 2024

## *From the Desk of Rod Wilt*



On behalf of our team at Penn-Northwest Development Corporation, it is my pleasure to introduce our summer edition of the Penn-Northwest Digest, a quarterly-produced digital publication dedicated to informing our region on how we are moving Mercer County forward! As the lead economic development organization for Mercer County, we are always looking for new ways to engage our membership, our government and community leaders, and our friends across the region. This publication will offer insights into what makes Mercer County, PA a great place to live, learn, work and play, and will recap economic development activities going on across the entire County. This issue's focus is the City of Sharon where the downtown retail corridor, the commercial district, Penn State-Shenango and public gathering places are all undergoing a revitalization! There is always more to do, but the progress they are making is worth showcasing.

Our intent with the Digest is to tell meaningful stories that can be shared across the County and region. Mercer County is growing, and we simply need more people to know about all the great opportunities that exist here.

We hope you enjoy this second edition of the Penn-Northwest Digest. If you have an idea for a future article or feature, please reach out to us. There are so many great stories to tell about this place we call home!

Rod Wilt, Executive Director

## Penn-Northwest Digest

*Vol. 1, No. 2  
Summer 2024*

**Penn-Northwest**  
**DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**  
*Affordable Solutions For Corporate Expansion*

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### **About Penn-Northwest**

*We are the lead economic development organization that assists Mercer County's plans for growth. We envision an economically diverse, self-sustaining group of communities where business and employment opportunities exist, all types of education and recreational opportunities are present, and economic prosperity can be reached by all residents of Mercer County.*



# Penn State Shenango Brings Baseball to Sharon



By Jane Goniea  
Photography by Penn State  
Shenango

**Penn State Shenango** announced its plans to add a men's baseball team back in 2022, with their first season slated for the spring of 2024. Months later, the team stands 18-10 overall, and the excitement has spread beyond campus and into the larger Shenango Valley community.

"The baseball team has made a major impact on campus," says Brandon Padgett, Director of Athletics at Penn State Shenango. "We have over 30 young men playing on our

team, which means that there are 30 more students on campus participating in events, attending local functions, and living in the Valley. So, not only are they helping develop student life on campus, but they are also participating in life outside in our local community, off campus. Many of our student athletes are renting in this community, spending money in our restaurants and stores, as well as getting involved in local service projects and giving back to the Sharon community."

In fact, the community was a vital component in bringing baseball to Penn State

Shenango. Padgett notes that "Mercer County has a robust history of strong baseball programs all the way from little league to the local high schools, with a similar situation in Lawrence County. Now Penn State Shenango can carry that legacy into the collegiate level and provide a playing opportunity to many deserving local baseball players." Because of this connection, the baseball team benefits Mercer County as much as it benefits the college, resulting in a coordinated economic development effort.

"Athletics plays an interesting, and sometimes overlooked, role, in community revitaliza-



tion," Padgett says. "Parents want their children to have good extracurricular opportunities, and by having a strong youth sports scene, we can communicate the health and vitality of our community to prospective families trying to move into the area. Sports can also be an avenue to education for students who may not have a lot of resources, or desire, to pursue a degree post-high school. By getting a student on a college campus, they can explore more of what they are passionate about and may return to the area to pursue work opportunities in their hometown."

The men's baseball team is not the only recent growth on the commonwealth campus. Besides baseball, Penn State Shenango offers academic programs and degrees that are direly needed, yet underrepresented, across the country. "Penn State Shenango offers so much for students to en-



gage with," says Padgett. "First, we offer academic programs that meet national demand but lack regional competition for students. Programs like our Physical Therapist Assistant and Occupational Therapy Assistant associate degrees, as well as our Cybersecurity and Criminal Justice bachelor's degrees, are needed across the country but very few schools offer the degrees regionally. Second, by reestablishing our athletic programs, we are now offering an additional incentive

for students to consider us as their destination for their post-high school plans. Our student-athletes can now earn a world class Penn State degree right here in the Valley while also continuing to compete in the sport they love."

*Adapted from a Q&A with Brandon Padgett, Director of Athletics at Penn State Shenango.*



# New Executive Director takes over Sharon CDC



By Jane Goniea

**Angie Urban** is the new Executive Director of the Sharon Community Development Corporation. We asked Urban a few questions about her new role and hopes for the City of Sharon.

*What hobbies or activities do you enjoy in your free time that connect you to the local community?*

I love to bring my family to events in the area and experience the 'sense of community' that exists when people are wandering downtown and engaged in activities with each other. My 7- and 4-year-old boys also love the bike courses at River Gardens Park. My 7-year-old loves the challenge of the all-terrain course, while my 4-year-old enjoys riding over the train track element on the learning track.

*Are there any specific challenges unique to Mercer County that you've had to navigate in your new role?*

Perhaps unique to Sharon is the 'fire hose' of opportunity that can feel a little overwhelming to an 'organizer.' The momentum here is so great that we almost feel like we're 'building the plane

while we're flying it.' Storefronts are filling, resources and support programs for entrepreneurs are taking shape, and experiential events are popping up weekly; it's a challenge to keep on top of it all and ensure that it's connected and communicated well.

*Have you witnessed any positive changes or developments in Mercer County over the years?*

Every community has to trust that their leadership makes the best decisions with the information they have available at the time. While I'm not familiar with past leadership, I can say that Sharon's current leadership has been very smart with this influx of opportunity in order to create longevity for the impact of its use.

*How do you see the local economy evolving, and what opportunities do you foresee for Mercer County?*

I believe we're witnessing a new wave of appreciation for a 'traditional' downtown setting where people can gather and feel connected to their community. 'Traditional' that is made modern, however, by also mixing dining, retail, and experiential opportunities. The Shenango LaunchBox is adding support to this wave by supporting entrepreneurs and start-

ing to highlight the great amount of local folks who are interested in owning their own businesses.

*Are there specific initiatives or policies you'd like to implement for the betterment of Sharon?*

I see the role of the Sharon CDC and our staff as creating conditions where positive change can happen. We are here to support and enhance existing initiatives and to start and create opportunities that fill in the gap to foster a healthy community. We are structuring the SCDC to reflect the Main Street model of community transformation, which highlights 4 pillars: economic vitality, design, promotion, and organization.

*In what ways is the SCDC helping to support and grow the City of Sharon?*

While the SCDC is an independent nonprofit organization guided by a board of directors, we work very closely with the City of Sharon to align on goals, projects, and initiatives. We don't have all the answers, but we love to engage in collaborative ways that make the impact stronger than any of us could do alone.



# 2nd Annual Economic Summit Draws Crowd

By Jane Goniea  
Photography by Tony Marr,  
Clever Marketing

**Old problems and new insights** were discussed at the Second Annual Mercer County Economic Summit on March 28th, 2024. The event, which was once again held at Grove City College, drew a crowd of about 160 Mercer County stakeholders, residents, and community leaders.

The summit was split into six panel discussions, each focused on a different market sector of Mercer County's economy. Panelists ranged from

company leaders to education professionals and public officials. Additionally, two presentations were given by Dan Zugell from the Center for Employee Ownership and Brandon Peters of the Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority.

The Cities and Boroughs panel featured Mark Longietti from the City of Hermitage, Bob Fiscus from the City of Sharon, Randy Riddle, the mayor of Grove City Borough, and Mercer County Commissioner Tim McGonigle. Each speaker touched on the demand for housing in the County, which continues to be an issue in repopulation efforts.

The Workforce Development panelists included Jake Rickert from Penn-Northwest Development Corporation, Doug Decker from Laurel Technical Institutes, Nate Hamilla from West Central Job Partnership, and Aaron Kline from Mercer County Career Center.

The Healthcare panel featured George Garrow from Primary Health Network, Joshua Miller from Allegheny Health Network, Elizabeth Piccione from UPMC Horizon and Jameson, and Chris Wright from St. Paul Homes. Dr. Garrow emphasized the importance of mentoring young people in the medical field.





The Manufacturing panel featured Jonathan Hall from Hall Industries, Tim Feeney from Zekelman Industries, and John Frangakis from Reynold Services, Inc. The Education panel featured Ron Rowe from Mercer Area School District, Emily Clare from Farrell Area School District, Brian Tokar from Greenville Area School District, Raymond Omer from West Middlesex Area School District, and Matthew Nelson from Keystone Charter School.

The Outdoor Recreation panel featured Nathan Reigner from PA's Office of Outdoor Recreation, Casey Shilling from Carried Away Outfitters, Dan Bickel from Pymatuning State Park, and Mark Scarpitti from Maurice K. Goddard State park. Shilling talked about "re-educating" the public about outdoor recreation, so that both children and adults can participate in outdoor activities.



A common thread amongst all the panels was the importance of workforce development, as employee shortages are felt in every sector of the economy. Teachers, doctors, and skilled laborers are in short supply in the County. Another topic was the need for Mercer County to market itself both to current residents and outsiders. Rickert pointed out the lack of awareness of job opportunities in the area, and Dr. Piccione mentioned how residents of the County can have a less positive outlook compared to visitors.

In addition to the panels, guests enjoyed a luncheon at the Carnegie Alumni Center, with a keynote speech by DCED Secretary Rick Siger. Siger discussed the new comprehensive economic plan and took questions from the audience.

As Penn-Northwest continues to push forward economic development initiatives of all sorts, the hope is that events like the Economic Summit will foster conversation and partnerships inside and outside of Mercer County.

# Shenango LaunchBox Thrives on Collaboration

By Jane Goniea

Photography by Mike McElroy

*Adapted from a Q&A with Tom Roberts, Project Coordinator for the Shenango LaunchBox and Mike McElroy, Strategic Communications and Marketing Coordinator at Penn State Shenango.*

## What made you decide to create a LaunchBox in Sharon?

The Shenango LaunchBox powered by the Greater Sharon Community was created in 2022, when community leaders in the City of Sharon had a unique opportunity to grant \$14.7 Million in American Rescue Plan Act money to support COVID-19 response efforts, replace lost revenue, and support economic stabilization for households and businesses. Part of their vision was to invest a portion of the funds to fuel entrepreneurs and economic development for the future.

Through trusted relationships and collaboration, the City placed \$2 million into two distinct endowments of \$1 million each at the Shenango Valley Foundation, an affiliate of the Community Foundation of Western PA and Eastern OH. Penn State University agreed to match those \$2 million funds.

One endowment exists to support Shenango LaunchBox and the other is intended to support economic development grants in the City of Sharon. Both endowments create a culture of innovation and drive economic development by leveraging the regional ecosystem and resources throughout the statewide LaunchBox network.

LaunchBox is a signature program of the Invent Penn State Initiative, a commonwealth-wide system to spur economic development, job creation, and student career success. Thanks to collaborative community relationships and a desire to impact the greater good, generations of entrepreneurs will benefit from the combined creative invest-

ment and vision that brought this project together.

## What sort of support does the LaunchBox offer?

The Shenango LaunchBox powered by the Greater Sharon Community blends entrepreneurship-focused programming, business startup training, and community collaborations to facilitate the process of turning ideas into viable products and services. We offer programs such as:

- E-ship 1:1 - Meetings with entrepreneurs of all types to connect them to the regional ecosystem.
- Idea Test Lab / Design Lab - helping entrepreneurs define and refine their ideas.







- Social Impact Accelerator – State-wide program for businesses with a social and environmental vision.
- Free legal advice - We connect entrepreneurs to partners with Penn State Law.
- Support in business planning with the SBDC.
- Ensuring the fundamentals of a new business venture have support from regional professional services including insurance, accounting, etc.

**In what ways is the Shenango LaunchBox helping to attract young people to Mercer County?**

We have been working with high schools, colleges, and young professionals like the Homegrown Initiative to connect interested entrepreneurs to our regional ecosystem. Aside from attending events,

we've hosted speaker series events throughout the County and will continue to deepen our opportunities for networking and supporting a healthy entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Through our connection with Penn State Shenango and its students, both local and from out-of-state, we are able to meet with young entrepreneurs who have an interest in starting a business locally, or who wish to expand upon existing businesses in the region.

**Can you elaborate on the \$2,500 startup grant the LaunchBox is doing in collaboration with the Homegrown Initiative?**

In collaboration with Jake Rickert and his team from the Homegrown Initiative, who identified funding for regional

businesses to recruit young entrepreneurs to the County, we will work with applicants to best position their pitch for funding through this grant. This grant funding stream could also be combined with other funds to support entrepreneurs.

**What are your future hopes for the program?**

We are hopeful that collaborations like this with Penn-Northwest will continue to inspire entrepreneurs and regional ecosystem partners to come together and support new business ventures and strengthen existing businesses.

I encourage everyone who is interested to connect with our team by visiting our website at <https://shenango.launchbox.psu.edu>.

# Aquaponics Farm Gears up for Summer Market

By Melinda Bowen-Houck  
Photography by Melinda  
Bowen-Houck

**Rob Studor** didn't set out to become a scientist, but running West Winn Urban Agriculture has turned him into one. The combined aquaculture and hydroponic farm – aquaponics – requires monitoring and scientific testing daily.

The facility is in the former Westinghouse building on Sharpsville Road in Sharon. Several years of planning, education, and fundraising resulted in the farm, which is now running at full capacity. Harvesting 400 heads of lettuce daily, plus an additional 400 on a weekly basis, a monthly harvest of between 40 and 100 fish, and employing 4, expansion plans are in the works and include an interactive classroom and lounge where students can learn about the process.

The harvested produce is sold to area restaurants and grocery stores, and the tilapia harvested are sold at area grocery stores. The public will be able to purchase products from West Winn at the Sharon Farmer's Market, which begins on July 7th and runs through October.



Waste products from the fish are converted by bacteria into nitrates, which are used to fertilize the hydroponically grown produce. The closed system produces fully grown heads of lettuce in 42 days, as opposed to 60 days in a traditional soil setting. Hydroponics uses less water, requires fewer people, is a smaller footprint than farming in soil, and produces a consistent product.

Each day on the farm starts with harvesting lettuce. Floating beds are removed from their tanks, the lettuce harvested and packaged for sale or restaurant use. This allows plants from the nursery to be loaded into the tanks, and then new seeds planted in the nursery. Testing of the water in the fish tanks happens daily, with the fish weighed weekly. The fish are fed high-quality food that arrives to West Winn by the truckload.



Studor points out that starting with high quality food leads to high quality fertilizer, and produces high-quality crops. Later this year, micro-greens and edible flowers are planned, and experimentation is happening with cucumbers, tomatoes, and beans.

Coming even sooner than the micro greens, look for a revamped West Winn Urban Ag website to hit the internet by the end of May, and make sure to look for them at the Sharon Farmer's Market!



